FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN — 4-15 SEPTEMBER 1995
BEIJING, CHINA
ACTION FOR EQUALITY, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

Portraits of Hope

The four stories told here illustrate the realities of women's lives and their strength and capacity to overcome obstacles when they have the right advice and assistance. The stories also show the need for a women's development agenda that can create new strategies for promoting sustainable livelihoods and stable communities.

GAINING NEW HOPE IN RAJASTHAN, INDIA

Andu and her two daughters struggled to harvest a few bushels of wheat from their plot of land in the village of Nichlaphala in north-west Rajasthan. When city-based aid workers arrived in 1982 to suggest that villagers put half their land into mulberry trees to feed worms, Andu, along with everyone else, was suspicious.

Worms, the workers promised, would make silk, and silk would make money, more than enough to make up for the wheat. One village agreed to try it only after a project officer swore in front of statues of their deities that he would truly try to help them each step of the way.

Andu joined 300 women in 12 area villages and began to grow mulberry trees. The project of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) provided silkworms and trained the women in sericulture: caring for the worms for the 25 days until they made cocoons, handling the cocoons, reeling off the silk, and processing it into thread.

The women now take the cocoons to a reeling centre in the village of Sisarma, where they make the thread for sale to weavers all over Rajasthan. Andu makes about US$700 a year, nearly 40 times more than the average family income in India. She has earned enough to pay off her debts and has sent her daughters to a district college. "And I no longer have to work long, back-breaking hours in the fields", she said.

Her family's diet is much better, too. A mulberry tree's deep roots seek out underground water so that it can survive drought without irrigation. As it holds moisture in the soil, vegetables can be planted among the trees: cabbage, spinach, mushrooms, carrots—the first Andu had ever seen. She raises chickens on the scraps.

The project also set up community-based health education projects to help the villagers deal with broader problems. Once a month, women meet to schedule work programmes: distributing silkworms, making bamboo implements, supervising health centres and the local primary schools. They also have begun discussing social issues, such as how to combat widespread problems of promiscuity.

Another 1,100 families joined the sericulture programme in later phases that involved the World Food Programme and the UN Population Fund, as well as

UNITED NATIONS

Silkworm-rearing project, India

local agencies. But aid workers are slowly withdrawing now, as the villagers learn to run the operation themselves. Soon they will be independent entrepreneurs. Andu views her future with hope, saying "I am leading the kind of life that my mother could only dream of."

CONFRONTING VIOLENCE IN BARBADOS

Her friends thought Elaine Hewitt was strong and courageous. In fact, the Anglo-Indian woman was being beaten regularly by her lawyer husband. "I thought if I kept quiet, by some miracle everything would become normal again." It didn't. The beatings went on for five years.

Violence against women tops the proposed agenda of action for peace at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing this September. Globally, gender-based violence is generally ignored and sometimes even defended as a man's right. But at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, abuse of women was declared to be a violation of human rights.

"My daughter died in 1975 of cancer at the age of 15", Hewitt said. "After that, my marriage fell apart." Hewitt, a trained nurse who had moved to Barbados from England when she married, turned to Roman Catholicism. Her husband, coping with grief in his own, classic way, began to drink, and to beat her. "I never told anybody", she said.

Finally, 40 years old, penniless, helped by a few close friends, Hewitt walked out. She divorced her abusive husband and, with her two remaining children, forged a new life. Now she works for a small women's crisis centre and hot-line service in Barbados, speaking out about domestic violence through groups there and elsewhere that have come into existence to combat the problem.

"Before, everybody blamed the victim", she said. Judges and police asked what the woman had done to provoke her attacker. Everyone tried to ignore the situation. "Only in one case in 25 does the violence stop and the marriage recover", she said. "It is an enormous problem."

Hewitt became such an effective advocate that UNIFEM helped to bring her and other women to tell their stories at the Human Rights Conference in Vienna. Their testimonies were key to introducing the issue of violence against women and the concept of "women's rights as human rights". Policy makers finally acknowledged the existence of gender violence and incorporated that recognition into the document produced in Vienna. "Women don't have the luxury of only speaking of civil and political liberties", Hewitt said there. "We don't have the luxury of only concerning ourselves with economic development issues. We don't have the luxury of compartmentalizing human rights. Women's rights to equity, personal safety and integrity are as important as the economic rights to food, jobs and health."

Hewitt refuses to cast blame. "We say the time has to come for people to get together and dialogue. Women must speak up, and men must speak up and ask for help to find out why they are behaving in this way. It isn't just women; the answer cannot lie with us alone. We need men to stand with us."

Now 55, Hewitt is proud of her achievements. She is also proud of her children, both college graduates. "My life is testimony that you can succeed no matter what", she said.

LEARNING SKILLS FOR A BETTER LIFE IN CAMEROON

Mrs. Yebo Ruth, at 70 years of age, is the proud possessor of new skills and new income to help herself, her children and her

grandchildren. Only a few years ago, she was one of many poor farming women in rural Pouma who could see that too much of the annual 10,000-ton harvest of cassava (manioc) was rotting before it could be used. Half of it went to make gari, a diet staple, but lack of fast transport to the city markets doomed the rest of the crop, even though the Government wanted to cut food imports.

Women produce an estimated 80 per cent of Africa's food. Yet some African Governments give more attention and support to the production of cash crops intended for export (tended chiefly by men) than they do to crops produced for domestic use (tended chiefly by women). Decisions concerning transport, currency controls, fuel and import policy are generally made by men, but greatly affect women by altering their market choices. When women's needs are ignored, however, everyone suffers. Sustainable development requires that the domestic food and food export sectors be linked in everyone's mind, and that policy makers recognize women's key role in national food security.

Cassava processing project, Cameroon

A private group called AID Cameroon looked at the problem of the cassava crop. They first offered to set up a project to buy bread made from cassava, for resale at the University of Cameroon. Mrs. Ruth was an eager participant. Then AID Cameroon with assistance from UNIFEM set up a cassava processing plant to produce gari, to be managed and owned by the 800 participating women. Mrs. Ruth quickly volunteered to be among those trained at a UNIFEM sister project in Ghana to learn how to run the project from sowing to market.

In Ghana, Mrs. Ruth learned techniques from picking cassava to heat-drying, from product packaging to work discipline and shift scheduling. AID Cameroon helped introduce better cassava varieties and developed distribution channels. Then a new problem arose; what to do with the mountain of peelings the new plant would generate? Mrs. Ruth, along with the 32 women's groups involved in Pouma, learned to use the cassava peelings as fuel for the new plant's dryers, and thus increased gari's shelf-life. More peels are sold to local livestock breeders for fodder, and the rest go to the women's compost piles.

UNIFEM

In 1976, at the beginning of the UN Decade for Women, the General Assembly established the Voluntary Fund for the UN Decade for Women to provide direct support for women's projects and to promote the inclusion of women in the decision-making process of mainstream development programmes. In 1985, the Fund became an autonomous body in association with UNDP and was renamed UNIFEM.

UNIFEM, sometimes described as a bridge between international organizations, policy-makers and disadvantaged women, is an aid to and adocate for women of the developing world. It works closely with UN agencies to provide direct technical and financial support to programmes that promote underprivileged women in the developing countries. Among its priority areas are trade and industry,credit, science and technology, agriculture and food security, and policy-making and national planning. In 1994, UNIFEM launched a Women's Human Rights Programme, aimed at strengthening the capacity of women's organizations in the developing world that work in the area of human rights.

Mrs. Ruth's new income from the gari plant changed her life. She has been able to expand her diet to include fish and meat. She invests money in a savings plan that will eventually give her women's group ownership of the new plant.

Mrs. Ruth invests most of her funds in education for her grandchildren, particularly her granddaughters, whose school fees and medical bills she pays when their parents cannot. "They will have everything I can give them", she said. "They will learn for a better life."

Brazilian rappers, "Geledes"

SINGING WITH A STRONGER VOICE IN BRAZIL

"I began singing rap in order to say some things about what it was like to be a woman", said Cristina Batista, 22, lead singer and songwriter of a rap group called Lady Happy. "In singing we can give concrete examples of everything, understand what is happening to us." Cristina is the second-oldest daughter of a cook with five other children, none of whom know their father. She began singing for money at the age of seven and dropped out of school after the second grade.

In the hilly, impoverished fringes of São Paulo, young people confront enormous challenges as they grow up. In 1992, with UNIFEM support, the Black Women's Institute (GBWI) of Brazil set up Rap Bands, a self-help project for low-income young people. Rap Bands' weekly meetings offer music education and technical training along with information on Black history, gender issues and reproductive health.

"The Black woman is discriminated against twice", said disc jockey and rap singer Quettry, age 20, another project participant. "Once for being a woman and once for being Black. Therefore, our style is really political."

The young people integrate their concerns into rap songs. Twelve participating bands have already made many songs into hits by taking the music into clubs and dance parties and onto radio and television performances. The project reaches an estimated 5,000 young people every month.

"Lady Happy has two records out with two other groups", Batista said. "In the future I hope to make a solo record. Of course I will keep working on the project. It made things clearer for me."

Written in association with UNIFEM

Voices of Consciousness

Each of us must think
That we have in our hands
Lost values and
forgotten rights.
We must change all of this!
Acting with integrity,
Analysing the facts,
With justice and humanity.

(Voices of Consciousness is an all-girl rap group in São Paulo)

Photo Credits
Page 1- Peter Larson/UNICEF, Page 2- UNIFEM
Page 3- UNIFEM, Page 4- Geledes

Published by the United Nations Department of Public Information
Printed by the United Nations Reproduction Section, New York
DPI/1636/Wom—February 1995—30M